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A safe journey through Barnahus-

Child participation and steps for improvement at European Barnahus

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1. Introduction

In line with the main objective of the call to “promote and support the rights of all victims of crime”, the EU project Journeys focuses on the rights of child victims to access child-friendly information and participation at Barnahus (Children’s houses, Child Advocacy Centres). The project addresses the aim, “contribute to the effective and coherent application of EU law in the area of the rights of victims of crime in line with the EU Strategy on victims’ rights”, by proposing a safe and informed journey through Barnahus for children being victims of crime. The Journeys project is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (article 24). It further aims to contribute to the implementation of the EU Strategy on victims’ rights and the Strategy on the rights of the child, the Victims’ Rights Directive (2012/29/EU), Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, and the Istanbul Convention. The project furthermore contributes to the implementation of the Barnahus Quality Standards, which have been recognised by the EU, the Council of Europe, national authorities, and services as the seminal reference document for Barnahus operations, and groundbreaking effort to harmonise standards for excellence in practice and implementation of EU and CoE law and guidance on child protection, child friendly justice and recovery for child victims and witnesses of violence.

Journeys specifically contributes to the Barnahus Quality Standards referring to the right of children to receive information and to be heard throughout the entire process in Barnahus and beyond, as cross-cutting priority (1) and in the context of best interests assessments (1.1), multidisciplinary and interagency collaboration (2), non-discrimination (3), a safe and enabling environment (4), interagency case management (5), in particular 5.4, which stipulates that Barnahus shall appoint a designated, trained individual or team member in Barnahus to ensure continuous support and follow up with the child and non-offending care givers, child friendly forensic interviews (6), medical examinations (7), therapy and crisis intervention (8), training and specialization of staff (9) and prevention work (10).

One main part of the Journeys project focuses on mapping, designing, and piloting a working method that ensures that child victims are heard, feel comfortable and safe to participate effectively at Barnahus. The first part of the project concerns the experiences from Barnahus on how they work in relation to the above described. This part of the project also includes experiences of involving a child liaison.

To be able to fulfil the aims of the project, mapping, development and evaluation of a working method, Marie Cederschiöld University in Stockholm, Sweden will collaborate with Save the Children, Sweden, Barnahus Galway, Ireland and one Swedish Barnahus.

The first step in this work included interviewing stakeholders such as professionals working at Barnahus (co-ordinators) and professionals involved in the development of the Barnahus model.

2. The current report

The current report is a first mapping of experiences from Barnahus regarding Child participation with a special focus on the child's right to feel heard, feel conformable and safe to participate. It builds on interviews with stakeholders with significant experiences of working with or within Barnahus. The interview guide (Appendix 1) covered questions related to experiences from Barnahus on how to work child focused and to actively include child participation. But also, questions related to specific work models, tools etc that has been used, and finally a deepened discussion related to the possibility of having a specific function or person connected to Barnahus that is responsible for the child during the Barnahus Journey, a child liaison.

In this mapping study, a total of eleven interviews were conducted with professionals who work within or with Barnahus. Information including an interview guide (Appendix 1) was sent out through the European Barnahus network to recruit informants. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was conducted via Microsoft Teams. Both coordinators who work within Barnahus and professionals with experience of developing the Barnahus model were interviewed. Most of the interviewees possess extensive knowledge about children and their vulnerabilities. The interviewees have diverse educational backgrounds including, Bachelor of Social Science, psychotherapy, psychology, and child psychiatry. Most of the interviewees are currently active working with Barnahus internationally, and most informants have specific experiences from Sweden, Ireland, and the U.S.

3. Aim and research questions

The aim of the mapping study was to collect experiences from relevant stakeholders related to Barnahus regarding work with child participation and the child's right to feel heard, feel comfortable and safe to participate at Barnahus.

Research questions were:

- How are Barnahus working with child participation with special focus on the child's right to be heard, feel comfortable and safe to participate?
- What are the challenges in this work?
- What would a suitable working model be to ensure the child's right to be heard, feel comfortable and safe to participate at Barnahus?
- What are experiences and reflections from including the role or function of a child liaison at Barnahus?

4. Results

4.1 Child participation at Barnahus

History

The interviewed experts described how Barnahus historically always had worked with a child rights focus. The whole Barnahus idea comes from the idea of making the journey through the criminal process as smooth as possible through collaboration and placing the child's voice at the centre. Those interviewed who had been part of building the Barnahus model described that the initial discussions focused on the need for professional collaboration when a child had been victimized. Even if the child forensic interview was a lot in focus, Barnahus was an attempt for all professionals involved with the child to share one location and make the situation as smooth as possible for the child and her/his family. The aim was to make Barnahus a child friendly and safe space where police did not wear a uniform, and the visiting, hearing and medical examination room should be designed from the perspective of making the child feel more comfortable. Working in and seeing the child in one location would set the stage for good collaboration between involved authorities such as police, social services, and the health sector. Throughout the years the child rights perspective has been developed and the ideas and discussions regarding child participation and the child's right to feel heard and listen has come in focus during the last few years.

Ensuring child participation in Barnahus today

There is an ongoing discussion in most Barnahus related to child participation and the child's right to feel heard, feel comfortable and safe while participating in the Barnahus journey. In all interviews the importance of the child's right was underlined, and the work was described as a constant work in progress. All informants working in Barnahus described how they actively work with child participation and how they especially work with children's right to receive information. Still, they described the work as challenging and in need of improvement.

The interviews gave a picture of everyone working to improve the child's situation at Barnahus, to get children's voice more heard but described this as a challenging work due to different circumstances.

Many informants described big differences and possibilities to work with child participation in different Barnahus but also within Barnahus. They argued that this had to do with national jurisdiction but also with attitudes and the view on child rights. One informant with long experience of developing European Barnahus meant that the child participation work often was related to how far the specific Barnahus has come when it comes to the child rights perspective, but also underlined the importance of assigned resources that makes this work possible. Other informants talked about cultural differences that could be related to a country, religion, and legal aspects but culture was also a concept that was used when describing differences within, group of professionals, organizations or a culture when it comes to collaboration between different professions and agencies.

In one Barnahus, child participation has been a core theme from the start, and it has become naturally embedded in the Barnahus culture. An interagency participation

group was set up from the start to ensure that all agencies involved in Barnahus were on board with the model of child participation. The same Barnahus also consulted children and young people when establishing the Barnahus and asked about the processes and premisses and about “pretty much everything”.

Even if the above described Barnahus worked to include children in a structured way already from the start other Barnahus also worked thoroughly to include children and improve child participation. One previous coordinator at Barnahus described different methods they had used to improve the child participation, such as developing information folders for children and parents and checklists for professionals. One Barnahus coordinator described an intense work by a group of representatives from social services, child psychiatry, police, prosecutor, and medical doctors. They met once a month and focused on the child’s right to information. They identified what kind of information the child needed and in which situations, who should share information and when etc. Their work resulted in an information guide helping professionals to know what information to share with the child and when in the process. This guide was tested and worked smoothly in many cases.

Many examples were given on written information directed at the child and or children’s families. The information could be downloaded or read in a paper version before or during the visit to Barnahus. Some also included contact information and who the child could contact if they had questions afterwards. Written information, folders, was something all informants thought was expected by them but at the same time were unsure of how often they were read by the child or family. No one had experienced a child contacting the Barnahus after they had read the information.

Examples of tools focusing on the professional collaboration to ensure child participation and the child’s right to information was described by many. For example, one Barnahus had developed a child participation protocol where all steps the child was involved in were listed. Another Barnahus has a similar protocol describing who was responsible for what. The experiences of working with these protocols were mixed. For some, the protocols worked well while in some places they had less value often because of limited resources to maintain a follow-up system.

One big difference between the Barnahuses was the referral pathways, which had impact on how Barnahus can work with child participation. In Sweden social services can pick up children from day-care or school and children are brought to Barnahus with or without them or their parents being prepared. In Ireland, the situation is different where the child and parent in most cases are well informed on beforehand and prepared for the forensic interview. No matter how the child is introduced to Barnahus all informants underlined the importance of a follow up for both the child and their parents. A Swedish model, “After the child Interview”, was described in the interviews. In this model social services leads the intervention of follow up acute crisis support. Here the child and family get information and a home visit already on the same day as the forensic interview. One of the Swedish informants said that at some Barnahus almost all children get this intervention and that this is a very good opportunity to give information and conduct screening for further support.

As described above Barnahus all over Europe have worked in various ways to ensure child participation but most of the informants said that progress needs to be made

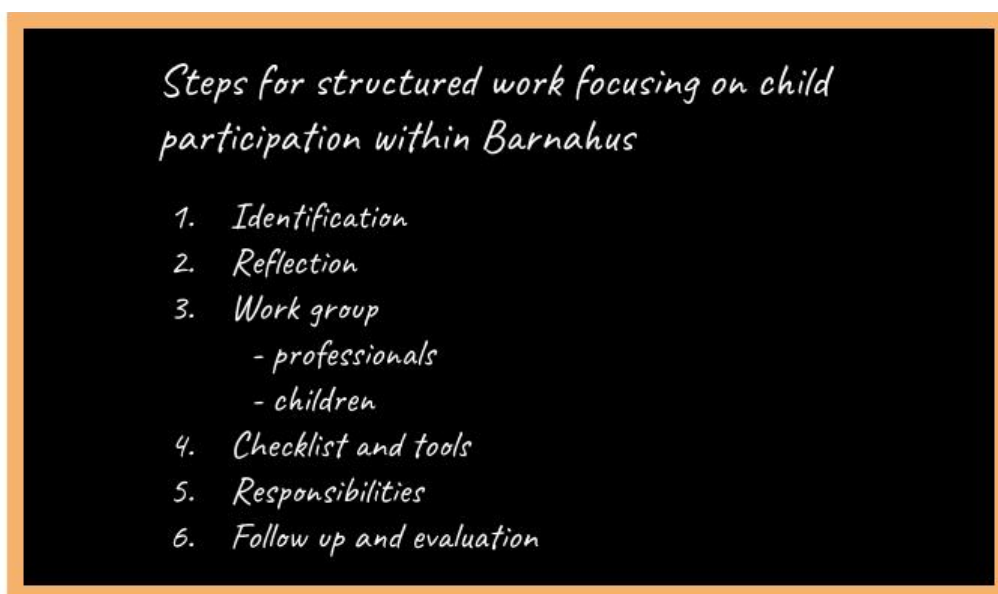
and the informants call for a joint structure related to this. As one informant described:

Child participation needs to be a given position at Barnahus, in the same way as other agencies listening in is part of the package, and that the child interview is done by educated interviewers and relevant evaluated psychological support by well trained therapists. This should be ensured for everybody!

4.2 A joint working model

The informants addressed the need of developing working models and tools that could form a base for the work with child participation and to ensure a safe journey through Barnahus. However, the joint picture, as described above, is that there are big differences due to e.g., jurisdiction and culture which makes it hard to find one model that will work for all. Also, there are big differences when it comes to the need of every individual child. At the same time there can be some core components that all Barnahus can work from.

Below we present certain steps that can help Barnahus in ensuring child participation based on conclusions and good ideas that was described during the interviews.



1. Identification

The first step to improve child participation within a Barnahus is realising that this work requires several steps and that it is not only one way of ensuring a child friendly environment and that the child gets information. One informant described it as “Barnahus must admit that it is a challenge to have a full child participatory work. Identification of the need for child participatory work includes many steps and is a process that doesn’t have an end”. The work with child participation was described by the informants as an overarching work that can be stretched to include all parts in the Barnahus work or something that needs to be well defined and limited to make it

more digestible. It is not work that is done in one meeting or conference. It must be an ongoing process.

2. Reflection

Second, the Barnahus need to reflect upon what child participations is and what it means for each room in Barnahus - i.e., work with protection, crime, physical health, mental health - at their specific Barnahus. This means that all agencies involved need to collaborate. The goal is to have longer discussions about what the child needs and how active child participation can be ensured and how these interventions can permeate the organization, to build a participatory culture in Barnahus.

3. Work group

To ensure that the above described will be carried out it is important that someone takes the lead in the Barnahus to develop a work group with representatives from all agencies involved. The work group should analyse the conditions for the specific Barnahus and map out who is responsible for what and when different tasks are to be carried out. Considerations should be made to include external agencies or NGOs who can play an important part in the child participation work even if they are not employed by Barnahus.

Except for the importance of a multi professional work group the interviewed experts also had ideas on how to involve children and young people. Giving children a voice in all steps is rudimentary and a work group of children is recommended parallel with the group of professionals.

The interviewed experts gave examples of many different forms of work groups and discussed which of them that had worked and not. The overall picture from their experiences is that the work group needs to be supported from the steering committee and management board of the Barnahus since this is a work that takes time and resources.

4. Check lists and tools

The work group needs to identify what is possible, reasonable, and practically manageable. The informants gave several examples of practical tools that have been used. Those were for example information for children and families as well as checklists for professionals. The checklists contained the information a child needs and described the steps needed to not leave out important elements. Also, this included follow up questions to children that they could answer on a tablet or another device that was easy to use and accessible.

5. Responsibilities

Who is doing what and when? A theme in the interviews was responsibilities and the challenges this area presented. During the interviews responsibilities has been the most sensitive and well reflected area. Some meant that it should be social services that are responsible for the work with child participation while others thought an assigned physical person outside the Barnahus with focus on the child should be

responsible. The conclusion of the discussion regarding responsibilities was that there might not be one way that is the right way for all Barnahus due to jurisdiction, cultures, structure, and management.

One expert addressed, regarding responsibilities, the issue of the specific individual need of the child that also needs to be taken into consideration. Examples were given where Barnahus had decided who was responsible for what at the first joint meeting depending on who had been in contact with the child already. Other examples were Barnahus that had tried to have follow up meetings, where the child's specific needs were discussed, and some Barnahus have this already as routine today.

As described above there might not be one single model for working in relation to child participation. Instead, the interviewed experts suggested different solutions. One informant expanded thoughts around this and meant that there should be a few different models to cover different types of cases that are associated with different complexities.

6. Follow up and evaluation

One issue that was not as well discussed by the informants but described in a more underlying way, was the need for follow up and evaluation. Through the interviews many attempts for this was described but today no Barnahus had found a working model for this. Everyone described the need to learn more from all professionals involved but also a need to follow up the children and their parents. Attempts had been made to evaluate the child's full experience of Barnahus but most often the response rates were very low.

In countries where it is possible to prepare the child and the parents for the child's interview, Barnahus can open up for a visit prior to the interview to look at the premisses but also to prepare for a follow up. For children that are taken to a child interview straight from day care or school, it is important to stipulate a form of contact just before the police interview but also straight after.

There has to be a good strategy and plan for each Barnahus in relation to follow up and evaluation of the child participation work within a Barnahus. As in the steps described above it is important with support from the steering committee and management group. A good idea is also to consider involving researchers in the setup of the follow up and evaluation to enable a more evidence based working practice.

4.3 Including a Child liaison role at Barnahus

One of the aims for this report was to focus on the informants' thoughts about having a specific person who had contact with the child through the Barnahus journey, a child liaison. A child liaison could be one solution to be able to give each child the full support they need. Two informants described the background to the thoughts of a child liaison or a child advocate and that this has been a living discussion throughout the whole history of developing the Barnahus model. The discussions had also differed between countries.

The informants all agreed that someone needs to take full responsibility for the child but as described above this could be organised in different ways. Some described it as more of a function than a person. Everyone also agreed that the function needs to be

well defined. Some meant that this could rely on one person, but most informants were reluctant to agree to this thought and meant that all professionals should be responsible, not just one person.

When it came to questions related to having a specific person responsible, a child liaison, the opinions varied. Most interviewed thought social services were the natural responsible agency and that the case worker could function as a child liaison. Others described the specially appointed legal representative as the person who could have this role. On the other hand, examples were also given from Barnahus who tried this model with an external person, from an NGO. The role was under development for these Barnahus, but the informants were very positive and hopeful in regard to this. They also meant that their discussions on who could be a child liaison resulted in a model where they preferred an external party that is not someone who already works within Barnahus. This to minimize the risk of the professional being “caught in their own biases and as practitioners”.

Those sceptic towards having one-person responsible raised thoughts around:

- Jurisdiction, how can information be shared and with whom? If it would be possible to share information with a child liaison the role needs to be defined and lie in accordance with national legislation and secrecy rules.
- To further dig into the jurisdiction, Barnahus is not today a legal person or authority on their own and can't keep joint journals or notes. If a child liaison should have access to information from each authority such as social services, police and psychiatry and somatic needs to separately decide, on a case level, what information they can share?
- Due to the challenges with information sharing there was a concern that the role of the child liaison would be meaningless, “toothless”. Scenarios were given such as if the child wants to have some information that the child liaison cannot access, the liaison must ask the child her or himself to find the information.
- To include an external person, means yet another professional in the child's life. Some meant that there already are too many professionals and that one more just would confuse the child even more.
- In most countries the parents need to consent to a child liaison which is a risk of not every child getting the support.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The current mapping report focused on how European Barnahus work in relation to child participation. From the interviews with experts, it stood clear that the topic is highly relevant and that all Barnahus are working actively for improvement. Most of their work focus on the right of the child to receive information before, during and after visiting Barnahus. However, the concept of child participation and the need for a child to feel heard, comfortable, and safe to participate must read as a broad concept and something that all Barnahus needs to identify and reflect upon.

From the interviews it was clear that there are big differences between Barnahus and possibilities for enabling child participation. However, every Barnahus needs to analyse how they can work more in a more strategic and ongoing way to improve the

child's position at their Barnahus. In this report we suggest six steps that all Barnahus need to work from to move forward.

To ensure the rights of the child to be informed, heard, feel comfortable and safe to participate, it is crucial that someone holds this responsibility. The child needs someone s/he can stay in contact with. That person that can be a child liaison or someone else holding the same function. In the Journeys project at least two Barnahus will test a model by employing a person outside of the Barnhus, an external child liaison. This work will be closely followed and evaluated in the Journey project and results will be presented during 2024.

To conclude, all Barnahus need to work more strategically around child participation and the child's right and need to receive information, being heard, and feel comfortable and safe to participate. This work needs to be developed in collaboration with all European Barnahus but with modifications depending on each Barnahus setting, culture and national legalisation. Also, adjustments must make it possible to meet each child's specific needs.